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# When in Rome... An overview of the new Italian Electoral Law



*Recent changes to Italian electoral law are intended to address similar anomalies to those that came to light in #GE2015 but, says Carlotta Redi, there seems to be little appetite for electoral reform in the UK as yet.*

Given the outcome of the General Election, it might be time to think about reforming the UK's electoral system. The election resulted in some strange anomalies; high levels of support for UKIP only secured one seat in the Commons while the SNP won 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland with the support of only half of the Scottish electorate. While the UK reflects on these and other paradoxical outcomes of the first past the post system, it may wish to consider current changes in Italy. Italian legislators have just approved an electoral reform introducing a new system, the so-called *Italicum*, which will enter into force from July 2016. Comparing the two, the Italian political scientist Roberto D'Alimonte has pointed out that ["the \*Italicum\* is a majority-assuring system, such that it ensures that there will be an undisputed winner, but unlike the British system, it is not a winner-takes-all system."](#)

The Italian electoral reform originated from a ruling by the Constitutional Court, wherein the existing electoral law was declared partially unconstitutional. In addition, reform was necessitated by the presence of small centrist parties, with a uniform distribution across the country, which were understandably hostile to systems based on single-member constituencies, such as a first-past-the-post. A further aggravating factor was the mediocre performance of electoral coalitions during the period 1994-2013. The two electoral laws of this period – based first on an additional

member system, and then on a majority bonus for the winning coalition - has given rise to electoral coalitions which were frequently subject to dissolution once in power.

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The Italian system has been reformed five times. The latest law, approved by the Italian Parliament and signed by the President of the Republic on May 6, has modified the previous system into a more proportional one, inspired by the Spanish model.

The corner stone of the reform creates a two-stage proportional system based on party lists, amended by a majority-ensuring bonus, and with a 3% election threshold. Candidates run for the lower chamber's 617 seats in 100 multi-member constituencies with open lists, except for a single candidate chosen by each party, who is the first to be elected. Gender balance is promoted by requiring that, in each region, the designated head-of-the-list candidates for each party should not exceed 60% of one gender. Additionally, candidates in all lists must be listed in sequence, alternating by gender.

In the first round, electors receive a ballot allowing them to vote for a single party and for the candidate at the top of the list, and are given the option of voting for up to two additional candidates from that party. At this stage parties are aiming to achieve a plurality (40% of the total vote). If the victorious party meets this threshold, it is allotted a minimum of 340 seats (54% of the places in parliament). The remaining 277 seats are allocated to the other parties on a proportional basis and no second round is required.

In the event that no party achieves the 40% threshold, a second round takes place two weeks after the first. This time, only the two most successful parties are on the ballot and voters are asked to choose between them – in effect, a run off for first place. The party winning the second round is attributed the 340 seats mentioned above and the remaining 277 seats are allocated proportionately (using the '[largest remainder method](#)') on the basis of parties' first round performance.

It is notable that at a time when Italy is changing its electoral system, there is so little discussion of these issues in the UK. The referendum on the AV voting system in 2011 did not generate much enthusiasm and it remains to be seen if electoral reform will return to the spotlight, perhaps in the context of a boundary review due during the life of this Parliament.

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Post by Carlotta Redi

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27th May 2015



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